

NN23 Sea Islanders NN23  
South Carolina

175 patterns. These dual occurrences encouraged rapid settlement of the islands south of Charleston, and created labor demands that brought a resurgence of African importations, ushering in the second phase of the Carolina trade.

First was the geographical change of rice-producing areas. In the 1750s inland swamps, which since the 1720s had been utilized for rice cultivation, were gradually deserted in favor of tidal and river swamps. These were better suited for growing rice because soil was more fertile and irrigation was more easily conducted. This discovery opened the remaining coastal frontier to settlement. Workers were not only needed for rice cultivation but also to clear away dense woods and growth prior to planting. Memory of the Stono Rebellion notwithstanding, large-scale use of white labor was never seriously considered. Not only was such labor scarce and expensive, but tidal swamps were infested with malaria-carrying mosquitos, and the summers there were so hot and unhealthy that whites convinced themselves they could not endure such conditions.<sup>12</sup> Rather than relinquish dependency on African workers, South Carolinians altered their ethnic preferences.

The second factor responsible for renewed interest in forced black labor was the cultivation of indigo in the Sea Islands. Great Britain needed large quantities of indigo for its textile industry and encouraged indigo production in the colony. But despite the prospect of a guaranteed market, and even though indigo was found growing in a wild state in Carolina, no commercial possibilities were realized until 1748. The change was precipitated by a young Sea Island woman, Eliza Lucas (later Eliza Lucas Pinckney), who from 1742 to 1744 engaged in a series of experiments. She crossbred and developed the plant through seed selection and from a West Indian indigo maker learned the difficult process of properly extracting dye from the plant. Indigo grew well in the Sea Islands and soon became the most favored commodity with the British government.

Next to rice, indigo was also the most bountiful source of wealth in the province, laying the foundation for many Sea Island fortunes while further enriching British textile capitalists. Commodity output of rice and indigo during this period of economic advancement was matched by heavy African importation. From 1740 to the eve of the War for Independence, South Carolina imported over 50,000 Africans into the colony.<sup>13</sup> This middle period of the slave trade provided the Sea Island region with numerically dominant African ethnic groups who strongly impacted Gullah religious culture and communal organization.